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Art in America

Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia

Minneapolis, At Walker Art Center

Lily Wei, Jan 22, 2016

The first two words of this exhibition's snappy title seem an unlikely pairing: one is associated with the freewheeling and populist, the other with the formal and elitist. Smartly, sensitively curated by Andrew Blauvelt (the newly appointed director of the Cranbrook Art Museum and former senior curator of design at the Walker), "Hippie Modernism" rounds up the art, architecture and design of the counterculture from 1964 to 1974. The premise is how little known most of these works are today, and Blauvelt—along with the contributors to the show's excellent, even indispensable, catalogue—determinedly addresses that oversight. He zooms in on the period between Ken Kesey's fabled cross-country, acid-fueled bus trip with the Merry Pranksters (which some claim launched the counterculture) and the OPEC oil embargo (when the escalating influence of the Gulf countries on global economies and policies created tensions that challenged hippie idealism).

The hundreds of objects on view include paintings, sculptures, photographs, installations, experimental furniture and alternative living structures. Additionally, several galleries are dedicated to prints, posters, flyers, magazines and other ephemera (the era's equivalent of social media, Blauvelt noted during a walkthrough). There are also experimental films, slide projections and performances, often incorporating innovative uses of light, sound, scent and motion. Together the works demonstrate, as the subtitle of the show suggests, how hippie culture's eager embrace of new technologies and idealistic concepts was not far removed from modernism's earlier espousal of the avant-garde and utopian thought.



Among many notable installations is an iconic structure from 1968, the multicolored 8-*Fold Polar Zonohedron*, re-created for the show by Clark Richert, Richard Kallweit and Ed Heinz, three of the founders of the Colorado artists' commune Drop City. Inspired by Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome and serving as a distinct example of the exchange between the counterculture and modernism, the structure is a small version of the collaborative live/work habitats developed by Drop City, the earliest of the 1960s communes. In contrast, there is a delicate fantasia of a tepee knitted from over 100 recycled sweaters by Evelyn Roth. Intended as an intimate, portable reading room, it was a more feminine/feminist endeavor, spurred by her interest in fiber art, women's work and the environment. Ken Isaacs's notion of transmitting learning was *Knowledge Box* (1962/2009), a wooden container in which viewers are inundated with light, sound, text and photographic images flashing from multiple slide projectors—prophetic of the way we assimilate information today.

Alternative lifestyles and ecology are major themes, as seen in Superstudio's films *Supersurface: An Alternative Model for Life on Earth* (1972) and *Ceremony* (1973), the group's members enacting practices for a more equitable, rational life. Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison's blooming, semi-dwarf citrus orchard is another instance. Meant to be portable, the trees are set in geometric tubs under grow lights. A more didactic arcadia is Öyvind Fahlström's installation *Garden—A World Model* (1973). Alone in an entirely green room, the handcrafted, hand-painted vinyl potted flora have petals with densely scrawled, damning facts about the ruinous state of the world.



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Full-impact psychedelia, surprisingly, was rather scarce, or perhaps just tamed by the sleekness of the installation and institutional setting. Jordan Belson's vividly colored, hallucinogenic film *Allures* (1961) was a memorable exception, although a larger projection would have been more effectively trance-inducing. Another was a gorgeous image of a recumbent, deliquescing Jimi Hendrix in Ira Cohen's series "Photographs from the Mylar Chamber" (1966-70), taken in the famous Mylar room he built in his New York loft where everyone looked turned on—and probably was.

Bruce Conner's spellbinding, stop-and-go, black-and-white film *Breakaway* (1966), however, might best capture the youthful optimism, rebelliousness and, in retrospect, innocence of the time. Intently focused on a gyrating and singing Toni Basil, it is arguably the first music video. Indeed, those were the days.